

# Correspondence

## JFK and the Revisionists

To the Editors: William V. Shannon tries hard but unsuccessfully in his June article, "John F. Kennedy and the Revisionists," to sustain his thesis that Richard J. Walton is wrong in maintaining that President Kennedy was an entirely conventional politician.

Given United States political values, strategic considerations and the like, does Mr. Shannon doubt that the perennial poor performance of the Saigon government would have impelled Kennedy to escalate the war à la Johnson and widen United States involvement à la Nixon?

Surely Mr. Shannon is familiar with the dictum "things are in the saddle riding man." If he has any further doubts, he should seek the counsel of contemporary scholars of foreign policy who might then classify his views as loyal but naive.

Elliott A. Cohen

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To the Editors: Book reviewers are entitled to have their say, and members of the editorial board are entitled to maintain their viewpoints whatever the evidence to the contrary; indeed, that seems to be the principal reason for their selection as board members. William V. Shannon's persistent crusade to maintain the image of JFK, however, deserves a rejoinder.

Like Richard Walton, I was one of those who cheered the election results of 1960, if from a distance. I was a professional military officer at the time and I had become convinced that poor old Ike had neglected national defense, in particular the part with which I was associated (airlift), and that the country did indeed have to "get moving." It was only when I returned to study for the doctorate two years later that I plunged deeply into research, and it

was an eye-opener. Let me concentrate on a single issue that makes the point and in terms which relate directly to Shannon's observations.

Shannon notes that Walton overrated Rostow's influence with Kennedy—fair enough. He, of course, doesn't quarrel with Taylor's influence, and therein lies the problem I deal with here. Generals Taylor and Gavin quit the Army in the late 1950's, defined themselves as "liberal Democrats," wrote their books damning Eisenhower, then attached themselves to Kennedy's campaign entourage as *official* advisors. The Taylor-Gavin gambit was to specifically identify those in the military who disagreed with them as "conservative Republicans." Kennedy played this game by rewarding the two of them after coming to office; Gavin, of course, went first to France and then to lucrative consulting in Massachusetts. More to the point, Taylor ultimately became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, an unusual appointment to say the least. It did not help the civil-military situation in the U.S. to select a JCS chairman from the campaign staff, especially one who had resigned in protest from the previous administration. The only imaginary parallels I can think of here are two: (1) suppose Eisenhower had appointed MacArthur as JCS chief; or (2) suppose a victorious Barry Goldwater had appointed General LeMay to the same post. This *politicalization* of the military, the most extreme version of it we have seen for decades, was extraordinarily dangerous, and it made its own contributions to the problems of the 1960's.

Part of Kennedy's commitment to the generals, of course, included the speedy arms buildup of the early 1960's, long before Vietnam was a problem. This massive acceleration of the arms race *must* have frightened the Soviets and, perhaps more than anything else, accounts for the long delay in getting started on meaningful arms control. This is the point Shannon misses, perhaps because he wants to, for how otherwise account for his treatment of billions in arms expenditures and speeches

in white tie and tails on the "Alliance for Progress" as roughly equivalent actions? But then again, Shannon reveals himself a totally unreconstructed cold warrior.

All of this, by the way, is said more in pity than in censure. The Kennedy behavior with the generals was only "normal" politics for those for whom the sole objective is power.

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William V. Shannon Responds:

Mr. Thayer brings up Kennedy's relationships with the military, which is an issue I did not focus on in my review and which is too serious and complicated for either of us to dispose of in a brief exchange of letters. I limit myself to two points: (1) Mr. Thayer is correct that the appointments of Generals Taylor and Gavin, particularly the former, do raise a problem of constitutional practice where military-civilian relationships are concerned; (2) Kennedy's appointment of Taylor is not quite so unprecedented as Mr. Thayer's reliance on "imaginary parallels" would suggest. I myself was disturbed in 1950 when President Truman appointed General Marshall to the civilian post of Secretary of Defense. The following spring, during the MacArthur hearings, the chief spokesmen for the Truman Administration's side of the case and the only ones who carried any weight with Congress were not civilians like Secretary of State Acheson or Mr. Truman himself but Generals Marshall and Bradley.

President Eisenhower did not appoint MacArthur as JCS chairman but he *did* appoint Admiral Arthur Radford—which to me was almost equally shocking. Radford was the moving force in "the admirals' revolt" in 1949 which resulted in Truman sacking the Secretary of the Navy and sending Radford into "exile" in the Pacific. Radford and the officers aligned with him were only a shade less flagrant than MacArthur

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